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Exporting Democracy

CONGRESS IS hip deep in its consideration of the Reagan administration's "Democracy Program." Most legislators think it's fine to give government money to the AFL-CIO to build unions abroad; it has been doing this work effectively for 30 years. Analogous institution-building by other private groups—business, foundations—also seems assured of approval as part of President Reagan's plan to strengthen the "infrastructure" of frail foreign democracies. But should money be funneled to the Republican and Democratic parties for this purpose? The House denied the administration's request to earmark \$5 million for each major party out of the \$31.3 million it seeks for the new program. The Senate has questions too.

There is first of all a vision of a giant slush fund allowing party functionaries to junket from one end of the world to another. It is probably inevitable that a new program whose purposes are admittedly rather grand and vague must surmount suspicions of this sort. The answer to them lies in conscientious service and good open bookkeeping.

A deeper objection arises from the pervasive feeling that there is something questionable, unfeasible or even improper about the direct promotion of democracy. In this light, democracy is seen as something that can and should be spread only by exam-

ple or precept, as a necessarily indigenous enterprise that is bound to be tainted when foreign and especially American hands are laid on. Or it is seen as a matter of culture and spirit and therefore one impervious to transfusions of process and mechanics in the way anticipated by the new program.

These are not frivolous considerations. Other democratic countries, however, have managed. International contacts have their own proven value. The American political process includes a body of knowledge and a range of techniques that can be transmitted at the technical level without unseemly interference. There are ways to do it badly, but there are also ways to do it well—starting small.

The discussion about the Democracy Program does not split people along familiar party or liberal-conservative lines. It seems to come down to a question of sensibility and political taste. We happen to like the idea. Democracy, after all, is the national ideology and the national pride. To preserve it here and build it elsewhere, Americans already spend billions on defense and aid. The CIA has been known to use its resources secretly to bolster democracy abroad. "Do not let the CIA disseminate what democracy is," Rep. Kika de la Garza of Texas said in the House debate. "Let the people who make it work do it."